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# Contemporary Criticisms of Christian Language

ROBERT T. OSBORN

THE question of language is a primary issue for theology today. Indeed, in the broad sense that theology is neither more nor less than the continuing criticism and reassessment of the language of the church, the question of language is always *the* question. Today, however, the question is being raised in a special way; there is a distinctive character to the challenge. Even though theology is always given to an examination of certain key words within the language of faith—such words as Atonement and Holy Spirit—it is not often that the language itself has been questioned. But this is precisely the case at the present time. Hence, the current question is not, “What does the word ‘Atonement’ mean?” but instead, “Is ‘Atonement’ a legitimate word?”

The purpose of this article is to assay a large portion of the frontier where such questions are being raised. This entails, of course, the risk of oversimplification. In identifying certain of the more formidable critics within and without the Christian church, together with their points of view, I shall indicate briefly, wherever possible, their alternative proposals.

## *Rudolf Bultmann*

From within the church no one has disputed its language so vigorously and effectively as Rudolf Bultmann. His program is so familiar that it need be sketched here only

in its essential aspects. In his Gifford lectures Bultmann acknowledges his debt to Wilhelm Dilthey and Friedrich Schleiermacher, for both of whom the documents of the past, including the Bible, were “firmly established utterances of life.”<sup>1</sup> For Bultmann, the central core, the true subject of history is man.<sup>2</sup> Man is also the subject of biblical history: “The question of God and the question of myself are identical.”<sup>3</sup> Insofar as I, a student of past history, exist as an authentic subject of my own present history, I have in my existence the key to the past. Hermeneutics must be existential. On the one hand, I must *know* formally the structure of human existence by means of existential analysis. Bultmann believes that this is most adequately provided by Martin Heidegger. On the other hand, if I am truly to understand, I must *be* existential, filling this formal structure with my own concrete historical decisions in the “now” of responsibility. In sum, to understand history, I must be an existentialist and I must be existential. And insofar as the Bible is history, it too can be understood only through the language of existence. Such language alone is able both to ask the right questions of the Bible and to declare the answer to modern man—indeed, to men of all times.

By means of his method of *Entmythologisierung* (Demythologization), Bultmann seeks to reduce the mythological language in the Bible to the original and ideal language of existence. It is important to bear in mind that his purpose is a positive one. He wants to put the biblical message into the proper language so that its true message can be heard and its offense reside where it ought to reside, i.e., in the matter rather than the form of Scripture. It is only in a secondary and even accidental sense that demythologiz-

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ing may make Christianity more appealing to modern man.

Bultmann rejects the language of myth but unfortunately he does not make sufficiently clear what he means by such language.<sup>4</sup> At one point he understands it as language set within an ancient, non-scientific world-view. Elsewhere myth becomes speaking about God in worldly terms. However, in light of Bultmann's positive program of translating the gospel into the language of existence, the view of myth with which he is most concerned is one which locates the gospel message in objective realities abstracted from man as historical subject and hence available without regard for man's existential relationship to them.

In this way Bultmann challenges us to speak in the language of existence. He charges that the church has translated the existential language of primitive Christianity into the unnecessarily offensive language of myth. Accordingly, he insists that the language he proposes is not a new one; it is simply the pristine language of the Bible. Just as Bertrand Russell found in the calculus of mathematics the key to all language, so Bultmann finds in the calculus of existence the key to all historical documents.

### Karl Barth

Barth's critique of church language is no less radical than Bultmann's. Perhaps because it is not as unique and certainly more wordy it has failed to impress the church, at least the church in America, as much as Bultmann's. Nevertheless, as Roger Hazelton has recently observed, "it was none other than Karl Barth who wrote, back in 1936, that the task of theology is to criticize and revise language about God by the principle of the standpoint peculiar to the Church."<sup>5</sup> By reason of this principle—contrasting as it does to that of Bultmann—Barth prefers to call theology a science, "a human effort after a definite object of knowledge" which "follows a definite, self-consistent path of knowledge" and is able to give an account of itself both to itself and to anyone who walks

its path of knowledge.<sup>6</sup> The peculiar principle which judges the language of the church and sets the goal of theology is Jesus of Nazareth, the Word and Revelation of God. The reality of Jesus is his reality as the Word of God, and "the essence of this person is identical with His language, action and passion."<sup>7</sup> This man of past history in the objectivity of his words and deeds is the Word of God. Barth's firmest statement of this position is contained in his formulation of the doctrine of election where he asserts that "between God and man stands the person of Jesus Christ, himself both God and man and so the mediator between them both."<sup>8</sup> We must be careful not to misunderstand Barth at this point. For him, it is *Jesus* who stands eternally between God and man. Commenting on the prologue of the Gospel of John, Barth asserts that Jesus is the meaning of the Logos. "He was in the beginning with God: Jesus was in the beginning with God." In fact, he goes as far as to say, in agreement with Athanasius, that "the preexisting God-man, Jesus Christ," is "the eternal ground of the divine election."<sup>9</sup> Barth thus maintains that it is impossible for the Church to say "God" without saying "Jesus of Nazareth." The objective history of Jesus, "his language, action and passion," is the Word of God. *Jesus* is the Word of God.

However, we must immediately add that Jesus is the Word of *God*. God is the true subject of biblical history, and ultimately, of all history: The "history of the covenant established by God, the gracious covenant between him and man" is "theologically speaking *the history*."<sup>10</sup> History is not so much the utterance of human life and the word of man as it is the utterance of God's life and word. Barth agrees with Bultmann that objective events as such are silent. But they are enabled to speak, according to Barth, by means of a theological hermeneutic. History's meaning is revealed as an answer to theological questions and not to existential questions. Barth also insists, as does Bultmann, that the interpreter of Scrip-

ture must be the right person as well as have the right method. But where Bultmann says that this person must have authentic existence, Barth affirms that he must have theological existence, existence in Christ.

The question we may ask of Barth is: Where and how does one acquire a theological hermeneutic and theological existence? Barth answers—with Paul—"Jesus of Nazareth," "whom God has made our wisdom," who "is the image of the invisible God, the first born of creation." Jesus, the incarnate Son, as the object of the theological reflection of the church, provides the necessary method, "the objective possibility of revelation," while Jesus, the Holy Spirit, as the subject of the theological life of the church, provides the necessary existence, "the subjective possibility of revelation." The goal of the investigation of biblical history by the man in Christ, aided as he is by Christological analysis, is *Jesus Christ*, the objective and subjective "reality of revelation."<sup>11</sup> Thus, the primary goal is not, as Bultmann would have it, "a certain possibility of existence."<sup>12</sup>

It is very significant that in one of the latest volumes of the *Kirchliche Dogmatik* Barth argues, against Bultmann and others,<sup>13</sup> that there was a pre-Easter revelation in the actual events of Jesus' life—although, to be sure, a provisional and conditional revelation:

In retrospect, from the standpoint of resurrection and ascension, in the light of this event, the decisive revelatory event, the Christian community discovered the anticipation of this event in the history and existence of Jesus Christ himself and as such. That is to say, the revelation had already occurred objectively in the pre-Easter sequence of events. . . . It is clear, not only with regard to the story of the transfiguration but with regard to all the other moments of the synoptic tradition, that it is difficult to draw with any certainty the line between the portion of the tradition which is shaped through retrospection and the portion which is shaped by direct memory. . . . His resurrection and ascension was and is nothing more than the authentic communication and proclamation of the perfect salvation deed, and indeed, the perfect salvation word, which occurred once and for all in His preceding history and existence.<sup>14</sup>

By calling attention to the pre-Easter "revelation" Barth reminds us that he who is fully revealed after Easter is the one who was before Easter. Jesus of Nazareth, then as now, is the Word of God. God can and does speak only in and through the life of Jesus.

Whereas Bultmann tends to reduce all religious language to the language of existence, Barth tends to reduce all such language to Christological language. The fundamental issue here is that of language—not just words, but language. Furthermore, the languages these two men propose are so disparate that no reconciliation seems possible. Perhaps both are subject to the criticism that the later logical analysts were to make of the earlier logical atomists and positivists: Language should be judged according to its actual use rather than through *a priori* notions regarding its essential or deeper meaning. In any case, here is a critical issue, which leaves contemporary theology at an impasse. Hermann Diem calls attention to the seriousness of the situation:

This difference between Barth and Bultmann is by no means limited to their conceptions of dogmatics relative to Biblical theology; it extends to the ultimate presuppositions of theological work as a whole. Hence it would seem no longer possible to find a common basis of discussion between them. . . . It is consequently understandable that today a mood of resignation prevails among theologians, who see no further possibility of fruitful discussion, with the inevitable result that each pursues his lonely way. . . .<sup>15</sup>

### *The New Quest of the Historical Jesus*

Is there a solution to the conflict between Barth and Bultmann? In the introduction to his *New Quest of the Historical Jesus*, James Robinson refers to the "rapprochement" between the "post-Bultmannians" and Barth which is effected by this new quest.<sup>16</sup> Günther Bornkamm's *Jesus of Nazareth* is an excellent example of the new development. It illustrates what appears to be a movement from Bultmann to Barth and may point the way to a resolution of the controversy.

Bornkamm makes clear his departure from Bultmann when he says that his task "is to seek the *history* in the kerygma of the Gospels, and in this *history* to seek the kerygma." The Gospels, he states, are concerned with the pre-Easter history of Jesus. "The Easter aspect in which the primitive Church views the history of Jesus must certainly not be forgotten for one moment, but not less the fact that it is precisely the history of Jesus before Good Friday and Easter which is ever seen in this aspect." Then in very Barthian fashion Bornkamm continues: "To whatever extent mythological conceptions from time to time find access to the thought and faith of the early Church, they are given once and for all the function of interpreting the history of Jesus as the history of God with the world. As the language of the New Testament puts it: the 'once' of Jesus' history as God's 'once and for all,' certain to faith."<sup>17</sup> For Bornkamm as for Barth the basic language of the church is the language of history, the language of the history of Jesus.

Jesus, the figure of the past, is so important to the church because the church "finds its God and itself in the past, in which its life and its character were given to it; and in the future, in which its life and its character are to be restored to it." Jesus is so significant because he is the Word of God, because he is a man of authority and mystery who "transcends the merely historical sphere." Yet his mystery and authority denote a reality which appertains to the historical Jesus, a reality not as yet subjected to interpretation. *Jesus* is the Word of God. Jesus of Nazareth is in his factuality *the* eschatological event: "The story told by the Gospels signifies the end of the world, although not, it is true, in the sense of an obvious drama and a visible catastrophe. On the contrary, it is not the world which ends here obviously and visibly; rather it is Jesus of Nazareth on the cross. And yet, in this story, the world reaches its end."<sup>18</sup>

Many more passages could be cited but these suffice to indicate that Robinson is

right in perceiving a rapprochement with Barth in the "new quest." The very fact that Bornkamm's book is entitled *Jesus of Nazareth*, and not, for example, *Jesus the Christ*, is itself highly significant. How this development may influence theology and the language of the church and whether it will actually succeed in bridging the gulf between Barth and Bultmann remains to be seen.

### *Logical Analysis*

It is appropriate to include in this survey reference to an influential movement originating outside the church which has gained a measure of support among theologians.

Logical or linguistic analysis refers to a rather broad philosophical movement that roots in Great Britain and primarily in the thought of George Elmer Moore and Bertrand Russell. Moore was offended that idealists could make statements which apparently denied the obvious truisms of common sense—common sense assertions regarding especially the reality of the external world. He therefore undertook "A Defence of Common Sense" (1925) in which he sought to analyze what he regarded as common sense truisms, and not to deny them. For him, therefore, the business of philosophy was clarification and not discovery, meaning and not truth, language and not fact. Bertrand Russell, troubled by the same "nonsense" of metaphysicians, felt that the reason otherwise intelligent people could talk with such apparent disregard for empirical reality was due to the limitations of everyday language. As a mathematician he was impressed with the precision of mathematical logic, according to which all mathematical propositions could be reduced to a few basic propositions and truth functions of, or inferences from, these basic propositions. He tried to develop such an ideal language for everyday usage in which the basic atomic propositions would somehow correspond to basic atomic facts, and all the atomic propositions, together with their truth functions, would somehow correspond to the system of

reality. This position, known as logical atomism, was held by its proponents, particularly Russell and Wittgenstein, without apparent regard for its metaphysical nature.

A. J. Ayer, who was influenced by the Vienna Circle of positivism, fed into this British tradition a deepened distrust of metaphysics and sought to develop as a substitute the so-called "verification principle," according to which a statement is meaningless if it does not indicate a method for its empirical verification. However, it was not long before a fundamental inconsistency in the verification principle came to be noted. For on its very premises the statements of the analysts and positivists about language must be judged meaningless. Evidently, Wittgenstein was the first to see this contradiction, and his own views were modified accordingly.<sup>19</sup> He became convinced that philosophy should rid itself of *a priori* notions regarding an ideal language and the relation of language to fact and concern itself only with language as such, with its actual use.

John Wisdom, one of Wittgenstein's pupils, publicized the latter's views and bears a good measure of responsibility for the current direction of British philosophy.<sup>20</sup> Especially influential was Wisdom's article "Philosophical Perplexity," which first appeared in 1936. Philosophy, according to Wisdom, is concerned with sentences which lack "a conventional use," which cannot be empirically verified. These sentences are an implicit request to philosophy for "a verbal recommendation," i.e., for a clarification "not by explaining the peculiar nature of the subject matter of the sentences . . . but by reflection upon the peculiar manner in which those sentences work."<sup>21</sup>

Friedrich Waismann wishes to "emphasize that the idea of truth also varies with the kind of statement; that it has a systematic ambiguity."<sup>22</sup> Wisdom had noted differences in levels of meaning; Waismann rightly perceives different strata of truth also. In particular, insofar as his analysis takes into account the situation of the man

who speaks, Waismann recognizes the subjective or existential dimension of truth.

In the United States this existential dimension is the explicit concern of Willem Zuurdeeg's *Analytical Philosophy of Religion*. Zuurdeeg's point of view has been described as "a treatment of religion on the basis of the methods of empirical [analytical] and existentialist philosophy."<sup>23</sup> Generally speaking, Zuurdeeg finds analytical philosophy congenial because it lacks metaphysical presumption and leaves room for the unique language of religion. However, Carl Michalson objects that analytical philosophy says too little, that the existential aspect is not adequately developed and that it is a poor dialogical partner for the theologian.<sup>24</sup> He would sympathize with a judgment cited (but not accepted) by Antony Flew: that insofar as philosophy is reduced to talk about words it is trivial, that such philosophers must "be selling their truthright for a mess of verbiage" and that "they would be identified better as 'verbosopers.'"<sup>25</sup>

Obviously, linguistic philosophy cannot be reduced to a single, consistent system. It is not unfair, for example, to observe that "the ghost of positivism" which Michalson discerns is not so visible in the later analytical movement as in the earlier. On the other hand, when Zuurdeeg turns to analytical philosophy because of its theological congeniality one must expect many of the linguistic analysts to question the legitimacy of his enterprise. Surely, however, we cannot ignore the challenge to analyze the perplexities of theological language, neither can we ignore the analytical tools proffered us by this philosophy. A good deal of theological perplexity today, and particularly the perplexing disparity between Barth and Bultmann, is linguistic in origin and substance, and it implicitly calls for a "verbal recommendation" just as urgently as has late British metaphysics. It is reasonable to expect that the sharply honed tools of analytical philosophy, their limitations notwithstanding, can be most useful in the clarification of theological perplexities.

### Conclusion

In Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann we find two disparate approaches to the question of Christian language. Barth is concerned to clarify for the church the once-for-all significance of Jesus of Nazareth. Bultmann is concerned to communicate to the world the abiding relevance of the living Christ. Barth's language is dominated by the past, by Jesus of Nazareth. Bultmann's language is dominated by the present moment, by existential faith.

It has been suggested that a solution to the impasse lies in the "new quest of the historical Jesus" which affirms that Christian language must be historical, centered in Jesus, as Barth has said, but at the same time existential and contemporary as Bultmann is maintained.

Perhaps modern analytical philosophy could help the theologian as he seeks to resolve the conflict between Barth and Bultmann. Although analytical philosophy does not claim much for itself as it once did, it nevertheless appears prepared to help the church untangle certain perplexing issues in theology by making the church aware of, and by helping it analyze, the variety of its languages. It may perhaps show that Barth and Bultmann are speaking in two different languages each of which is valid in its own terms but not valid in its exclusive claims.

The four points of view we have examined must be reckoned with by contemporary theology. For they raise forcibly the entire issue of the language of the Christian church.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Presence of Eternity*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957, p. 113.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>3</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958, 58.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ronald Hepburn, "Demythologizing and the Problem of Validity," in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, edited by Antony Flew and David MacIntyre, New York: Macmillan, 1955, p. 227ff.

<sup>5</sup> Roger Hazelton, *New Accents in Contemporary Theology*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960, p. 1. But Hazelton gives the wrong date; the first

appearance of the quoted passage was in the German edition of 1932.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, translated by G. T. Thomson, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949, I, 1, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1948, II, 2, p. 101.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 105, 118.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, translated by G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956, I, 2, pp. 1ff., 230ff.

<sup>12</sup> Bultmann, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

<sup>13</sup> One must qualify this judgment. Bultmann himself has been moving toward the position taken by the so-called "post-Bultmannians." Cf. James Robinson's *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus*, Studies in Biblical Theology No. 24, Naperville, Illinois: Alex R. Allenson, 1959, pp. 20ff.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1955, IV, 2, pp. 151ff.

<sup>15</sup> Hermann Diem, *Dogmatics*, translated by Harold Knight, London; Oliver and Boyd, 1959, p. 80.

<sup>16</sup> Robinson, *op. cit.*, pp. 22ff.

<sup>17</sup> Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, translated by Irene and Fraser McCluskey with James M. Robinson, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960, pp. 21ff.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 55, 62.

<sup>19</sup> G. J. Warnock notes that the change is anticipated even in the *Tractatus Philosophicus* in which Wittgenstein states that in a sense his entire enterprise is senseless on the grounds of logical atomism (*English Philosophy Since 1900*, London: Oxford University Press, 1958, p. 41). See also I. T. Ramsey, "Contemporary Empiricism," *The Christian Scholar*, XIII, 3 (Fall, 1960), 176ff., for an appraisal of Wittgenstein's views of the verification principle.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. J. O. Urmson, *Philosophical Analysis*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953.

<sup>21</sup> John Wisdom, "Philosophical Perplexity," *Philosophy and Psycho-Analysis*, Oxford: B. H. Blackwell, 1957, pp. 32, 38.

<sup>22</sup> Friedrich Waismann, "Language Strata," *Logic and Language*, second series, edited by A. G. N. Flew, Oxford: B. H. Blackwell, 1955, pp. 22ff.

<sup>23</sup> W. F. Zuurdeeg, *An Analytical Philosophy of Religion*, New York-Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958, from the jacket description. See also his article, "The Implications of Analytical Philosophy for Theology," *The Journal of Bible and Religion*, XXIX, 3 (July, 1961), 204-210.

<sup>24</sup> Carl Michalson, "The Ghost of Logical Positivism," *The Christian Scholar*, XIII, 3 (Fall, 1960), 223-230.

<sup>25</sup> From the introduction to *Logic and Language*, *op. cit.*, pp. 4f.